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ABSTRACT

The problem under investigation concerned (1) determining the ball games of Native American girls and women of the Great Plains, (2) determining the geographical spread of the games within the culture area, and (3) determining the characteristics of the various games. Data for this investigation were obtained from the 48 "Annual Reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution" published from 1881-1933 and the 84 volumes of the "American Anthropologist" published from 1888-1974. The data indicated that four games of ball were played by Native American girls and women of the Great Plains during the period under observation: (1) doubleball, (2) juggling, (3) shinny, and (4) racket. Girls and women from 12 Plains tribes played ball games. Doubleball and shinny were played throughout an extensive geographical area by women from 11 tribes. The games of juggling and racket were found to exist in only one tribe each. (Author/RC)

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BALL GAMES OF NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN OF THE PLAINS

The playing of athletic games was common to the culture of the native North American. History is replete with accounts of the North American Indian and his athletic games. While the vast majority of the literature referred to the games of the male, it was evident that Native American Indian girls and women also had their repertoire of games which were a part of their culture.

It is customary to divide the North American continent into culture areas which enable convenient distinctions to be made. North of Mexico there are ten culture areas: the Northeast, Southeast, Great Plains, Southwest, California, Great Basin, Plateau, Northwest Coast, Subartic, and Artic.

No Indian group so caught the fancy of the twentieth century as did the Plains Indians. The Great Plains, a sea of grass that sustained the buffalo, also nurtured the tribesmen who became the stereotype of all American Indians.

Problem

The problem under investigation concerned itself with the following: (1) determining the ball games of native American girls and women of the Great Plains, (2) determining the geographical spread of the games within the culture area, and (3) determining the characteristics of the various games.

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Procedure and Definitions

Data for this investigation were researched from the forty-eight Annual Reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution published from 1881 to 1933 and the eighty-four volumes of the American Anthropologist published from 1888 to 1974. Reports from such preeminent early American ethnologists as George Bird Grinnell, George A. Dorsey, James Mooney, and Walter Hoffman were included heavily in the data sources. In addition, the observations of the noted early historians of the North American Indian, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and George Catlin, also were included.

The operational characteristics of categorical terms basic to the investigation were defined:

(1) Ball game. A contest utilizing a ball as an inherent tool and characterized by (a) organized play, (b) two or more sides, (c) criteria for determining the winner, and (d) agreed upon rules.

(2) Great Plains Indians. Those Indians that lived in that geographical area of North America lying roughly between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains and between the Saskatchewan River and the Rio Grande River. During the golden age of the Plains Indian, some thirty tribes lived in the Great Plains culture area, the best known of which were the Arapaho, Arikara, Assiniboin, Gros Ventre, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Hidatsa, Otoo, Pawnee, Ponca, Sioux, and Wichita according to Dee Brown.

Results

From the data researched, four games of ball were played by Plains women: doubleball, juggling, shinny, and racket. Of the thirty tribes cited by Brown as belonging to the Great Plains culture area, or thirty-one as

cited by Wissler, women and young girls from twelve Plains tribes played ball games. These tribes were the Arapaho, Arikara, Cheyenne, Cree, Crow, Hidatsa, Omaha, Pawnee, Santee Dakota, Teton Dakota, Yankton Dakota, and Wichita. Within ten tribes, the possession of one of the ball games was mutually exclusive with other ball games. That is, if the females of the tribe played doubleball, they were unlikely to play juggling, shinny, or racket. Only the Santee Dakota and the Omaha played two ball games.

Doubleball was one of the major games played by Plains girls and women. Essentially, the game consisted of carrying and flinging a doubleball, two balls or analagous objects bound together by a thong, with a stick toward a goal at either end of a field.

Doubleball, commonly called the women's ball game, was played by Plains native American women from tribes extending from the North to the South of the culture area; from the Cree in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Wyoming, the Arikara and Santee Dakota in North Dakota and Minnesota, the Omaha of Nebraska, to the Pawnee and Wichita of Oklahoma. Of these six tribes only the Cree from Wyoming allowed both men and women to play the game; it was considered a woman's game throughout the culture area.

The field upon which the game took place varied in length considerably; the Omaha played on a field from three hundred to four hundred yards long while Wyoming Cree played on a fifty yard field and the Saskatchewan Cree field was one mile in length. The

approximately twelve inch long doubleball commonly consisted of two buckskin bags filled with sand and connected by a thong of the same piece of buckskin. The ball was flung or thrown by a single curved stick about one yard in length although Catlin describes the Santee Dakota as using two sticks, one held in each hand.

Stakes, commonly wagered upon the results of the game, consisted of such items as buffalo hides, dishes and bowls, necklaces, awls, ribbons and calico. The women's game of doubleball accompanied no ceremony, was connected with no ritual or rite, nor was it a ritual of any ceremony.

Shinny also was a major game of Plains girls and women. Essentially, it was a game where a ball was struck by a stick toward a goal at either end of a field. Like doubleball, shinny was played by women of six Plains tribes: the Cheyenne, Crow, Teton Dakota, Yankton Dakota, Hidatsa, and Omaha. However, the geographical area in which the game was played was more restricted than that of doubleball. The data produced evidence of the game being played in present-day Montana, North and South Dakota, and Nebraska.

In those tribes where women played shinny, the game was not considered solely a woman's game. Generally, women's shinny was the female version of an equivalent men's game in the tribe. However among the Crow, the women formed teams against the men and among the Sioux a few men augmented both parties of women players.

No mention was made of the size of the field upon which the game was played and in only one instance was the goal noted, namely, two blankets spread side by side on the ground. The two to four inch in diameter shinny ball generally was covered with buckskin with a median seam and was flattened. The stick was made of sapling approximately three feet long and curved at the striking end.

The data provided no information regarding the practice of gambling in connection with the game. The only possible ceremonial connotation with shinny was with the Crow who played the game only in the Spring when the grass was green. It was the Crow who played men against women.

The games of juggling and racket were minor games of Plains girls and women. Juggling or ball bouncing was played by Arapaho women only. The foot bouncing version of the game was played by standing on one foot while bouncing a soft stuffed ball on the instep of the other foot. In the arm bouncing version, a smaller ball was bounced from the arm muscle to the palm of the hand by bending and straightening the arm. The game generally was played by unmarried girls or women although it was played sometimes by older women especially when gambling.

The game of racket consisted of carrying and throwing a ball with a netted stick toward a goal at either end of the field. The sole Plains women who played the game of racket were the Santee Dakota in Minnesota. The fact that among the Dakota, women were allowed to participate in the game was considered evidence that the game was a borrowed one. Among most other tribes, women were not even allowed to touch a ball stick.

Conclusion

Based upon the accounts from which the data were drawn, North American Indian women of the Great Plains played two ball games, doubleball and shinny, throughout an extensive geographical area that covered, in large measure, the culture area. Women from eleven tribes were cited as playing either doubleball or shinny. The games of juggling and racket were traits of the culture of only one tribe each.